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p. 5  
USDA'S ROLE IN THE RURAL CLEAN WATER PROGRAM

One of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's most important missions is to maintain and enhance our nation's environmental quality. Obviously, that's not all we do in USDA...and there are other agencies with strong environmental roles...but the time is gone when the Department of Agriculture is negative or passive on this matter. In everything we do, from farm programs to forestry to rural development, decisions are made with sensitivity to their environmental consequences. Explicit attention is given to minimizing and mitigating any adverse impacts. More than that, USDA has strong initiatives--action programs with environmental improvement as this key purpose.

My intention here this morning is to document this general theme of environmental action in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and to focus in some detail on one aspect--the implementation of the new Rural Clean Water Program.

Several specific natural resource initiatives demonstrate our resolve in this general area:

Last fall, Secretary Bob Bergland signed a new Land Use Policy statement for the Department. This document puts the USDA squarely on record as an advocate for retention of important agricultural and forest lands and the protection of floodplains and wetlands. We specifically acknowledge leading roles for state and local governments. We have absolutely no interest in usurping authority presently exercised elsewhere. But the federal government should clean up its own act in this

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Remarks prepared for delivery by Dr. M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Conservation, Research, and Education, before a conference on New Advances in Technical Assistance for Water Quality Planning, at Michigan State University's Natural Resources Days, East Lansing, Michigan, March 20, 1979, 11:15 a.m.

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have a major effect on rate and pattern of farmland conversion. USDA is preparing procedures to help assure that Federal agency decisions consider impacts on farm and forest lands. In that regard, I applaud the initiative taken by your State director of the Farmers Home Administration, Bob Mitchell, to direct that State FmHA lending policies be revised to protect important agricultural lands.

We recognize and respect the rights and responsibilities of landholders in private land use decisionmaking--and the rights and responsibilities of State and local governments in developing public policies regarding non-Federal land use.

We will, however, take a strong, positive stand on these issues:

--We will advocate the retention of wetlands, for all the wildlife, flood control, water supply and other values that have been identified at meetings such as this across the nation.

--We will advocate the retention of important farmlands, forest lands, and rangelands, in the interest of sustained, economical food and fiber production.

--We will advocate actions that reduce the risk of flood loss, minimize impacts of floods on human safety, health, welfare, and restore and preserve floodplains.

--We will advocate other practical land use and management actions that can improve the quality of water that reaches wetlands and floodplains.

Another area of special concern to me has been the slow rate at which planned land treatment practices have been applied above structures

regard and we shall help this happen. A broad range of Federal actions in our watershed projects. We recently changed our SCS policy to require that at least 50 percent of the planned land treatment be in place before construction of a reservoir may begin. That is, we want to assure that soil and water conservation needs actually are met when federal dollars are committed for a watershed project. In this approach government and land users have distinct partnership roles in accomplishing water management objectives.

You may have heard of the term "MIPS." MIPS is bureaucratic shorthand for a cooperative effort between USDA and EPA called Model Implementation Projects, and designed to curb rural nonpoint source pollution. Seven model projects have been selected around the country to be funded. Each project has unique resource problems. Also, each has a unique mix of local, state and federal agency involvement. We believe that solutions developed in our MIPS program will guide future efforts to implement the Rural Clean Water Program.

A major USDA activity with important natural resource implications is our implementation of the new National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations. As most of you know, the President's Council on Environmental Quality was directed to adopt binding regulations for the implementation of NEPA. The new regulations go beyond mere process for preparation of an environmental impact statement. They cover all agency activities. Agencies are charged to determine if their activities are "major federal actions significantly affecting the human environment." This determination is to be based upon an environmental assessment. We are aggressively implementing these regulations in USDA. Further, we've made progress in

streamlining the EIS process, to limit needless redtape without compromising the purpose of an EIS. We've gone so far as to insist that the statement be readable and understandable!

Another effort of major concern to me is the implementation of the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977, or RCA for short. We've borrowed Dr. Lawrence Libby from Michigan State University to help us with a number of environmental issues, and Larry serves as the Executive Secretary of our RCA Coordinating Committee. This committee provides policy direction for the RCA activity. We are developing a comprehensive soil and water resource appraisal, and draft alternative programs will be out for review in August or September. We hope to take advantage of your experience in formulating the best possible soil and water conservation program for the nation. The states are active partners in this RCA process. Art Cratty, SCS State Conservationist for Michigan, has an active program underway. Secretary Bob Bergland laid out the RCA challenge with his admonition that "nothing is sacred." Soil and water conservation programs could be in for some major changes. Non-traditional approaches that work are being sought.

All of the items I've mentioned have a water quality component. Now let's focus our attention on where we are in implementing the Rural Clean Water Program.

Non-point source water pollution is important to all of us--but possibly for different reasons. Non-point pollution, by definition, is an "erosion" of our natural resources:

- It reduces the productivity of the soil.

- o It impacts adversely on fish and wildlife.
- o It impacts adversely on the quality of the landscape.
- o It diminishes the utility of the water in our lakes and streams.
- o It reduces the quality of our recreation experiences.
- o And it costs us money--huge sums of money.

The Rural Clean Water Program is designed to reduce agricultural non-point source pollutants to improve water quality in rural areas to meet water quality goals. The objective is to be achieved in the most cost-effective manner possible in keeping with the provision of adequate supplies of food and fiber and a high quality environment.

The Rural Clean Water Program (RCWP) is a voluntary program, authorized in 1977 by the Congress, to apply best management practices (BMPs) on privately owned rural land in selected areas. Landowners in eligible project areas may enter into 5 to 10-year contracts until September 30, 1988, to receive cost-share and technical assistance to apply these practices to reduce water pollution.

Program rules and regulations were published in the Federal Register on November 1, 1978. The 1980 budget for the Soil Conservation Service includes \$75,000,000 for RCWP, and the ASCS budget has \$25,000,000 earmarked for water quality efforts. Eight RCWP workshops, jointly sponsored by SCS and EPA, are being held now around the country. Some of you already may have attended one of these workshops.

Water pollution caused by agricultural activities will be reduced. The national investment to control point sources of pollution has been

substantial: \$25 billion in the last 5 years. There is a firm commitment by the federal government and industry for continued high levels of investment. Progress has been made in controlling point source pollution to the degree that non-point source pollution is becoming the major problem in achieving national water quality goals. Benefits from investments in point source pollution control will not be fully realized without investments in non-point source pollution control.

Agricultural pollutants are the main source of nonpoint water pollution. Runoff from cropland contributes about 50 percent of the total sediment entering our inland waterways. Annually, over 400 million acres of cropland contribute 2 billion tons of sediment to streams, lakes, and rivers. More than 50 million tons of plant nutrients and over 750,000 tons of pesticides are applied to agricultural land each year. Animal wastes from 200,000 feedlots contain organic waste material that is contributing to pollution problems.

We have established a National Rural Clean Water Coordinating Committee to oversee the administration of this program. RCWP activities are coordinated through local, state, and national committees made up of the appropriate USDA, EPA, State, and local agencies. SCS has detailed staff members to EPA's national and 10 regional offices.

Projects are authorized only in areas where EPA has approved a "208 plan" (or appropriate portion) and where the designated "208 management agency" has certified that the practices to be cost-shared are consistent with the 208 plan and will result in improved water quality. Michigan has been among the leading States in completion of its State 208 plan.

In the face of estimates that solving the non-point source pollution problems of the nation would cost billions of dollars, Congress determined that this program should be made available only in those high-priority areas, and for those high-priority pollution sources, where maximum improvement of water quality could be obtained by proper land treatment. 208 planning agencies already are required to identify such high-priority areas as part of their 208 planning process.

Five to 10-year contracts will be the basis for all cost-sharing to assure that land users apply the annual management practices needed to achieve non-point pollution control, in addition to installing physical measures. Contracts will be based on conservation plans approved by soil conservation districts. Contracts will follow the land in event of sale, and land users will be required to refund federal cost shares if the contract is violated.

USDA can enter into agreements with soil conservation districts, state soil conservation agencies, or state water quality agencies to administer all or part of this program. Some states and several conservation districts are now administering their own conservation cost-sharing programs that include long term contracts. So far these programs have been highly successful. Expanding this capability can allow significant expansion of the nation's conservation effort without greatly increasing the number of federal employees required.

Before entering into a project, the Secretary must be assured that there will be an adequate level of participation by land users. Senate sponsors foresaw a situation where improved water quality depended on

properly treating 50 percent of the cropland in an area, but only 20 percent of the land was entered into the program. Under such circumstances, they felt, the federal money spent on the 20 percent would be ineffective. The 208 management agency is required to assure that an adequate level of participation will be realized.

Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland and EPA Administrator Doug Costle recently signed a joint Memorandum of Understanding which emphasized their mutual commitment to achieving the nation's environmental goals. We will continue to coordinate our water quality activities closely with the EPA to assure maximum effectiveness of actions to achieve improved water quality.

An effort that closely parallels this program is the joint effort between USDA and Canada to improve water quality in the Great Lakes. I met recently with Bob Sugarman, Chairman of United States activities for the International Joint Commission on the Great Lakes. We're both concerned about the water quality of the Lakes, and I have pledged USDA support to help where we can. We have learned much through working with our Canadian friends on the Great Lakes Pollution from Land Use Activities Reference Groups studies. These efforts will help as we proceed with implementation of the Rural Clean Water Program.

I'd also like to mention a major effort undertaken by this Administration of interest to you all--the implementation of President Carter's Water Policy directives. Last year, the President issued a water policy statement calling for a number of reforms. He followed that policy statement with directives to Cabinet officers requiring additional

reviews of agency programs, with a specific charge to develop alternative approaches that can save water, be more cost-effective, and cause less environmental harm.

We have been asked to look at all our programs for agricultural assistance, soil conservation, technical assistance, and housing loans to assure that we are consistent with the President's water policies. When completed, these efforts are sure to result in improvements in water quality, because we are specifically looking at salinity, irrigation return flows, and instream flow values, as well as at better program delivery approaches which result in water savings. There is general agreement among top level staff at USDA that water policy is among the most crucial concerns for the future of agriculture in this country. There is much at stake.

I recognize that I have given you a large dose of information about numerous efforts underway in the USDA. Water quality issues are complex--often cutting across many program areas. I am confident that our efforts--in partnership with state and local agencies and land users--will result in continued production of food and fiber--in a way that is in harmony with our nation's environmental goals.

Thank you.

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Thank you.